UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

THE QOG INSTITUTE
QUALITY OF GOVERNMENT

The Effect of Public Perceptions of Corruption on System Support: The Case of Sweden

Jonas Linde

Gissur Ó Erlingsson

QoG WORKING PAPER SERIES 2011:3

THE QUALITY OF GOVERNMENT INSTITUTE
Department of Political Science
University of Gothenburg
Box 711
SE 405 30 GÖTEBORG

March 2011

ISSN 1653-8919

The Effect of Public Perceptions of Corruption on System Support: The Case of Sweden

Jonas Linde
Gissur Ó Erlingsson

QoG Working Paper Series 2011:3
March 2011
ISSN 1653-8919

Abstract

Traditionally, Sweden is viewed as a country where corruption and abuse of power for personal gains have been regarded as rare exceptions. Accordingly, Sweden is consistently found at the top in various international indices of corruption. In recent years, however, several instances of corruption and power abuse have been exposed in the media, and surveys have shown that large shares of Swedish citizens harbour perceptions that corruption is not uncommon among politicians and public officials. Drawing on recent survey data, two empirical questions are being investigated. First, to what extent do Swedish citizens believe that corruption constitutes a serious problem? Secondly, how do citizens' evaluations of the extent of public corruption affect support for the performance of the democratic system? Approaching the issue from a comparative Nordic perspective, data indicates that Swedish citizens are considerably more prone to believe that politicians and public officials are corrupt and act non-impartially than their Nordic counterparts. The analysis also suggests that such perceptions constitute an important determinant of public support for the performance of the political system. Thus, even in a least likely case of corruption, such as Sweden, growing public concerns about the extent of corruption has a potential to negatively affect the legitimacy of the democratic system.

Jonas Linde
Department of Comparative Politics
University of Bergen
jonas.linde@isp.uib.no

Gissur Ó Erlingsson
Centre for Municipality Studies
Linköping University
gissur.erlingsson@liu.se

Introduction

Corruption distorts free market competition, reduces the readiness of companies to invest, and inhibits entrepreneurship. Additionally, corruption threatens the legitimacy of the rule of law and lowers public confidence in political institutions. It therefore undermines important prerequisites for both economic growth and democratic governance (cf. Bowler & Karp 2004; Jain 2001; Rose-Ackerman 1999; Goudie & Stasavage 1998; della Porta & Vanucci 1997). All in all, for states, widespread corruption is bad for business.

Sweden, we argue, is a good place to scrutinize closer if one wants to learn more about the effects of corruption. This is so precisely because corruption and abuse of power has traditionally been perceived as rare exceptions from the rule in Sweden. In international rankings, such as *Transparency International's* (TI) Corruption Perceptions Index, or the *World Bank's* Worldwide Governance Indicators, Sweden has consistently received top rankings. For example, since TI launched their corruption index in 1995, Sweden has never been ranked lower than the sixth least corrupt state in the world. In 2010, Sweden shared the fourth place with Finland with a score of 9.2. Only Denmark, New Zealand and Singapore were ahead with 9.3.

Moreover, in the latest Rule of Law Index presented by the *World Justice Project*, Sweden was ranked number one (Agrast et al 2010). The high rankings in international comparative indices, and a general international image portraying Sweden as a 'clean' country, corresponds neatly with the general Swedish self-image, i.e. that Sweden is a country ruled by law and where corruption and abuse of power are hardly never takes place. Hence, Sweden can very well be labelled a 'least likely case' concerning the occurrence corruption and low

quality of rule of law. One could therefore argue that results on the effects of corruption found in this context most probably are magnified in other settings.

Sweden's low levels of corruption are, of course, good news. Politically, corruption is challenging fundamental democratic principles, since it erodes the link between citizens and government. As Sandholtz and Koetzle (2000) argue, corruption takes place behind closed doors and provides privileged access for some actors, whilst therefore excluding others. Corruption violates democratic norms of transparency, equality and fairness. In essence, it contravenes the basic principle of impartiality, i.e. that public institutions should operate in an impartial, rule-based manner, a principle which has been emphasized as *the* defining feature of high quality government (Rothstein and Teorell 2008). If citizens perceive their political representatives and civil servants as being devoted to their own enrichment, rather than to the public interest, trust and support for the democratic political system and its institutions could well be eroded (Sandholtz & Taagepera 2005, 109; cf. Norris 1999).

Related to this, it is important to note that although Sweden is recognised as one of the least corrupt countries in the world does, this does not imply that corruption and power of abuse are wholly absent (cf. Andersson et al 2010). In fact, throughout the last two decades several corruption scandals have been exposed at all levels in government. Sweden has also recently been internationally criticised for the way it deals with its problems of corruption. For example, the European Council has expressed harsh critique against Sweden for lacking a formal regulation on political party financing (Sandgren 2009), and already in the early 2000s, Sweden was criticised by GRECO (Group of States Against Corruption, 2001) for lacking sufficient means to detect and prevent corruption. Additionally, recent surveys have showed that, for example, one out of six top officials in Swedish municipalities have

experienced bribe-attempts (*Dagens Samhälle* 2010), and one out of three Swedish municipalities have experienced cases of corruption in 2010 (*Sveriges Radio* 2010).[1] As Erlingsson et al (2009) argue, it may well be the case that corruption and power abuse has become an increasing problem throughout the past three decades.

Thus, although Sweden historically has been regarded as one of the world's leading states in controlling corruption, recent developments suggest that also 'least likely cases for corruption' are not immune from problems concerning corruption and power of abuse. It is important, we maintain, not to regard the exposed corruption cases as rare exceptions to the rule. On the contrary, one must acknowledge corruption as a real existing problem in Sweden that may well, in the long run, generate several of the unwanted effects.

In this paper, we focus on one of the negative effects that is often highlighted in comparative research on corruption, but seldom empirically investigated, and certainly not in advanced democracies such as Sweden: To what extent does corruption affect public support for the democratic system? Drawing on recent survey data, we set out to answer two empirical questions. The first deals with the way Swedish citizens view domestic corruption problems: To what extent do the citizens believe that corruption is a serious problem in Sweden? The second question deals with the effect of citizens' perceptions of corruption on system support: Are citizens' evaluations of the extent of public corruption an important determinant of support for the performance of the democratic system? From the results of a few earlier studies we know that the occurrence, and perceptions, of corruption affect public support for the political system (Anderson & Tverdova 2003), particularly in countries where corruption

[1] This new found interest in corruption and power abuse from Swedish media in 2010 was sparked by the exposure of a large scale corruption scandal in Sweden's second largest city, Gothenburg, where several top officials had tight connections with a construction company, and allegedly, had let themselves been bribed to treat the company favourably in the municipality's purchasing processes.

is more widespread and where levels of political support are lower, e.g. in Latin America (cf. Seligson 2002; Booth & Seligson 2009) and Central and Eastern Europe (cf. Linde 2009; Rose et al 1998). Thus, by studying the effect of perceived corruption on system support in a 'least likely' case as Sweden, the results will contribute to our general understanding of the determinants of system support also in mature welfare states and advanced, 'non-corrupt' democracies.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first section, the central concepts of the analysis are defined, discussed and operationalised. In the second, a descriptive analysis of public perceptions of corruption and institutional fairness, drawing on recent survey data, is carried out. The third part attempts to show that perceptions of institutional fairness and public corruption is an important determinant of public support that has been underestimated in earlier research on system support in advanced democracies, such as Sweden. In the fourth part, we present the conclusions and the implications of our analysis.

Theory: Corruption, impartiality and political support

The last decades has seen a steady increase in empirical studies of the causes and effects of what has been labelled 'quality of government' (cf. Rothstein & Teorell 2008; Rothstein 2009; 2003; Charron & Lapuente 2010; Adserá et al 2003; La Porta et al. 1999; Geissel 2008). Although not a coherent body of research, most studies have one thing in common: they regard corruption as one of the most, if not *the* most, serious challenges to governance of high quality. Besides having damaging economic effects, corruption contravenes what has been put forth to be the basic principle of quality of government, namely *impartiality in the exercise of public power*. According to Rothstein and Teorell (2008, 170; Rothstein 2009) this

means that 'when implementing laws and policies, government officials shall not take anything about the citizen/case into consideration that is not beforehand stipulated in the policy or the law'. Thus, impartiality in the exercise of public power rules out all forms of corruption and 'particularistic' practices such as clientelism, patronage and discrimination (Rothstein & Teorell 2008, 171; cf. Kurer 2005).

The focus on impartial implementation of political policy means that citizens' perceptions of the impartiality of public institutions and actors that implement public policy will be our main concern here. Our argument is that citizens' evaluations of the impartiality of institutions and public officials exercise a significant impact on evaluations of the performance of the political system as a whole (cf. Norris 1999; Linde & Ekman 2003; Dalton 2004; Anderson *et al*. 2005; Easton 1965; 1975). Our theoretical and empirical claim is thus closely related to the 'procedural fairness' argument, stating that it is the fairness of the procedures through which institutions and authorities exercise authority which is the key to the willingness of individuals to defer to the decisions and rules created and implemented by those authorities and institutions.[2] Thus, we assume that evaluations of the fairness of decisions and implementation of policy are independent of one's self-interest (Kumlin 2004, 42; 2007, 373; Tyler 2006). There are a number of important reasons why people care about the way decisions are made and in what way they are implemented. For example, that most people consider fair treatment a moral right, that procedural fairness provides reasons to trust decision-makers and civil servants, that fair procedures indicate that one is respected by the party making the decision, and that procedural judgements provide individuals with a mean to evaluate outcomes when the fairness of outcomes in themselves is uncertain (Esaiasson 2010). Thus, whether citizens regard policies and decisions as legitimate depends on whether

[2] For a review of procedural fairness theory, see Tyler (2006) and Esaiasson (2010).

they believe them to be fair and impartial and, of course, if they are *implemented* in a fair and impartial manner (Rothstein 2009; Gilley 2009, 72; Tyler et al. 1989; Tyler 2006; 1994).

Previous research has examined a large amount of factors that may influence what people think about the principles and performance of their political system and its institutions. These investigations can be divided into two main approaches (Weatherford 1992, 149). Macro-studies have emphasised formal system properties, such as the appropriate set-up of democratic institutions that would allow for accountability, responsiveness and representation, and their importance for system support. Micro-level studies emphasise the importance of citizens' attitudes and actions, such as political interest and trust in political institutions. More recently, some analysts have made successful attempts to combine both perspectives in cross-national multi-level analyses, taking into account both micro-level characteristics and contextual variables on the macro-level (cf. Anderson *et al*. 2005).

These approaches have generated hypotheses about the impact of a large number of factors that may explain public support for the political system. The vast amount of empirical studies that have been produced in this field – covering both old and new democracies – cannot be described in detail here. However, the various explanatory factors that have been investigated can be categorised into a number of broader areas of interest. The research during the last decades has highlighted the importance of issues such as different aspects of *economic performance*, both actual and perceived, (cf. Clarke et al. 1993; Finkel et al. 1989; Rose & Mishler 1994), *political factors*, such as perceptions of the regime's respect for human rights, levels of corruption (on the macro-level), being a political winner or loser, type of electoral system and political interest (cf. Hofferbert & Klingemann 1999; Evans & Whitefield 1995; Anderson & Tverdova 2003; 2001; Anderson & Guillory 1997; Anderson et al. 2005; Blais & Gélineau 2007; Wagner et al. 2008; Mattes & Bratton 2007), interpersonal and institutional

trust (cf. Putnam 1993; Warren 1999; Kunioka & Woller 1999; Dalton 2004, 69-71), and *value change* (cf. Inglehart 1997; Inglehart & Welzel 2005).

The explanatory factor which is our main concern here has received a surprisingly limited interest from political scientists interested in the determinants of political support. However, throughout the last decades, a small but growing stock of evidence that supports the 'fair process effect' has been produced. It has been shown that the legitimacy of political authorities and institutions diminishes when they do not adhere to norms of procedural fairness. This is true both in established and in new democracies. In the American context, Tyler et al. (1989) have demonstrated that diffuse support for the political system is to a large extent a product of the citizens' judgement of procedural fairness. Kumlin has shown that individual experiences from interaction with welfare institutions have a substantial effect on trust and social capital in Sweden (Kumlin 2004; cf. Kumlin & Rothstein 2005).[3] Drawing on survey data from the US and Norway, Miller and Listhaug (1999) found that public evaluations of the fairness of government processes are an important aspect when it comes to judging the trustworthiness of government.

The importance of procedural fairness has also been shown in more recent democracies. In a comparative analysis of four Latin American countries, Seligson (2002) concluded that procedural injustice and partiality in the form of corruption has a significant negative effect on support for the political system in general. In a more recent study of eight Latin American countries, Booth and Seligson (2009) found that citizens that have been subjected to corruption consistently evaluated the performance of their governments and political institutions more negatively. However, it is important to note that the two latter studies

[3] Also see Esaiasson (2010) in which it is shown that the perceived fairness of treatment has a strong impact on citizens' acceptance of decisions by government officials. In fact *perceived* fairness is observed to matter much more than the *actual* conduct by the officials.

investigated in what way people's *actual experiences* of corruption affect support, not citizens' perceptions of the corruptness of public officials. Interestingly, the findings of the few micro-level analyses available also seem to travel well to the macro level. In a panel analysis of aggregated West European survey data, Wagner et al (2008) show that high-quality institutions, such as successful control of corruption and rule of law, exercise a strong positive effect on aggregate levels of satisfaction with democracy.

Thus, drawing on the results of earlier research on different types of democracies we may hypothesise a positive relationship between citizens' *perceptions of the impartiality* – measured as perceptions of fair and non-corrupt government institutions – and *support* for the performance of the political system in general. In other words, citizens will evaluate the political system in positive terms if they believe that the system is impartial in the exercise of political power. Since we are interested in explaining support for the political system as a function of factors measured at the level of individuals, this study fits in neatly with the micro-level approach described above.

Perceptions of impartiality and corruption: Sweden in a comparative perspective

It is important to view Sweden's top rankings in different corruption indices from a comparative perspective. Most countries – in particular developing countries and 'transitional' states – have serious problems with corruption and abuse of power. The fact that Swedish authorities are viewed as world leading when it comes to fair and impartial institutions is not in any way a guarantee for the *absence* of corruption. Quite the opposite, some analysts have recently pointed out that corruption and abuse of power is becoming an

increasing problem in Sweden (Erlingsson et al 2008; Erlingsson 2010). From our perspective this is bad news. The theory described above predicts that corrupt and impartial behaviour on behalf of public officials – and even more serious; widespread *public perceptions* of corruptness – should have negative effects on citizens' evaluations of the performance of the political system.

To investigate this hypothesised relationship we start out by inquiring how Swedish citizens perceive the extent of corruption and impartial behaviour among politicians, public officials and institutions. Here we will place Sweden in a comparative Nordic perspective, presenting survey data on perceptions of institutional fairness and extent of corruption also from Denmark, Finland and Norway. Like Sweden, these countries have earned an international reputation as being in the top when it comes to belonging to the world's least corrupt countries. In the 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index, Denmark comes out as most successful in the world at combating corruption with a score of 9.3 (together with New Zealand and Singapore). Finland and Sweden share the fourth place with a score of 9.2. Norway is rated somewhat lower, receiving the tenth place with 8.6.

A central argument in the procedural fairness theory is that people are concerned with aspects of their experience from contacts with the authorities that are not linked to actual outcomes. These aspects include impartiality, lack of bias, honesty, politeness and respect for citizens' rights (Tyler 2006, 7). Thus, individuals that feel that they have been treated equally and fair by the authorities, also tend to be more prone to view decisions and outcomes as legitimate. In order to investigate public perceptions of procedural fairness, we will utilise survey data tapping ordinary citizens' views of the impartiality and fairness of public officials. Table 1 presents responses to a question about to what extent the respondents believe that public

officials are treating people fairly. The data reveal a substantial degree of distrust in the fairness of public officials in the Nordic countries covered in the *International Social Survey Programme's* (ISSP) survey 'Role of Government IV'.

Table 1. Fair treatment from public officials, 2006 (Per cent)

	Almost always	*Often*	*Occasionally*	*Seldom*	*Almost never*
Sweden	**24.9**	**35.5**	**26.1**	**9.9**	**3.6**
Denmark	44.9	36.5	12.9	3.6	2.1
Finland	32.0	40.5	18.1	7.0	2.5
Norway	25.5	40.7	23.0	7.7	3.2
Mean	31.8	38.3	20.0	7.0	2.85

Source: International Social Survey Programme (2006).
Note: Question reads: 'In your opinion, how often does public officials deal fairly with people like you?' 'Can't choose' and 'No answer' have been left out.

In Sweden, ranked as number one in *World Justice Projects'* rule of law index, no less that 13.5 per cent of the respondents state that public officials only 'seldom' or 'almost never' treat people fairly. Only a fourth believe that people 'almost always' are being treated in an even-handedly manner. There are no dramatic differences between the Nordic countries, although the Danes stand out substantially more satisfied with the fairness of public officials, while Sweden show the highest levels of discontent. The Swedish citizens are also those clearly most prone to think that the treatment people get from public officials depends on contacts (Table 2).

Table 2. Treatment by officials depends on contacts, 2006 (Per cent)

	Definitely	*Probably*	*Probably not*	*Definitely not*
Sweden (n=1133)	**41.0**	**48.5**	**9.0**	**1.6**
Denmark (n=1287)	8.4	32.3	24.8	16.5
Finland (n=1075)	13.4	43.5	36.1	7.0
Norway (n=1234)	21.4	46.7	28.0	3.9
Mean	20.7	42.5	29.3	7.5

Source: International Social Survey Programme (2006).
Note: Question reads: 'Do you think that the treatment people get from public officials in [Country] depends on who they know?' 'Can't choose' and 'No answer' have been left out.

As is evident, a stunning 41 per cent of the Swedish respondents believe that individual citizens 'definitely' could take advantage of personal contacts in their dealings with public officials. Another 48 per- cent believe that this is 'probably' the case. In the other Nordic

countries the corresponding levels are much lower, with the Danish respondents expressing the highest levels of trust in the impartiality of public officials. Thus far, it seems evident that there is a widespread feeling among Swedish citizens that many public officials disrespect the principle of impartiality in their implementation of public policy. This is particularly interesting considering Sweden's international reputation as a country where the rule of law reigns, and problems of corruption and partial exercise of power are among the lowest in the world.

We now turn to a number of questions more specifically concerned with corruption among public officials and politicians, both on the national level and in Swedish municipalities. The first question concerns corrupt behaviour among public officials. The result is presented in Table 3. Once again, the Swedish respondents report the highest levels of distrust. About a fourth of the Swedes regard 'almost all' or 'quite a lot' of the public officials as being involved in corrupt activities of some kind. Not even one out of ten Swedes believes that corruption among government institutions is an extraordinary action to such extent that 'almost none' are taking part in it.

Table 3. Public officials involved in corruption, 2006 (Per cent)

	Almost none	*A few*	*Some*	*Quite a lot*	*Almost all*
Sweden (n=936)	**8.2**	**30.6**	**36.6**	**21.8**	**2.8**
Denmark (n=1133)	31.1	53.5	12.4	2.2	0.8
Finland (n=970)	13.5	36.1	33.2	14.6	2.6
Norway (n=1164)	8.2	29.9	42.7	18.7	0.4
Mean	15.6	37.8	31.0	14.0	1.5

Source: International Social Survey Programme (2006).
Note: Question reads: 'In your opinion, about how many public officials in [Country] are involved in corruption?' 'Can't choose' and 'No answer' have been left out.

The same pattern is found when citizens are asked about the extent of corruption among politicians (Table 4). Almost 22 per cent of the Swedish respondents report that 'quite a lot' or 'almost all' politicians are corrupt to some extent. The corresponding figures in the other

countries are substantially lower, with Denmark at the other end of the spectrum (3.4 per cent).

Table 4. Politicians involved in corruption, 2006 (Per cent)

	Almost none	*A few*	*Some*	*Quite a lot*	*Almost all*
Sweden (n=929)	**11.3**	**32.5**	**34.3**	**17.1**	**4.7**
Denmark (n=1170)	40.0	46.8	9.7	2.2	1.2
Finland (n=957)	17.0	37.1	29.8	13.8	2.3
Norway (n=1138)	22.4	32.3	34.4	10.3	0,6
Mean	23.6	37.5	26.4	10.3	2.1

Source: International Social Survey Programme (2006).
Note: Question reads: 'In your opinion, about how many politicians in [Country] are involved in corruption?' 'Can't choose' and 'No answer' have been left out.

When it comes to perceptions of absence of corruption, there is a considerable variation among the four countries. In Denmark, the share of respondents thinking that 'almost no' politicians are behaving corrupt is 40 per cent. In Sweden this proportion is only 11 per cent, while the corresponding figures for Finland and Norway are 17 and 22 per cent. All in all, this short presentation of available comparative data testifies to a consistent pattern. Swedish citizens are considerably more negative in their evaluations of the way public officials and politicians stick to the principles of fairness and impartiality in political decisions and the implementation of public policy than their Nordic counterparts.

From our perspective, seeing procedural fairness as a potentially important determinant of political support, the first question that comes to mind is if the negative evaluations of the Swedish citizens compared to the publics in the other countries are transferred to the level of more general political support. Unfortunately, the ISSP 2006 survey does not carry any questions about support for the political system and its institutions, making it impossible to examine the relationship between perceptions of impartial treatment and system support. The item that comes closest to a proxy for some kind of generalised political support is a question

about whether or not the respondents trust civil servants to do what is best for the country.[4] Of course, this question is closely related to the items asking about the fairness and corruption of public officials and not surprisingly, the micro-level correlations between the 'public officials-variables' and trust in civil servants are strong.[5] Somewhat more interestingly is the fact that citizens' perceptions of the extent of corrupt behaviour among *politicians* also are strongly correlated with citizens' general trust in civil servants (Pearson's r ranging from .28 in Denmark to .45 in Finland). On the aggregate level the relationship is relatively strong. In Denmark, where citizens are most likely to believe that politicians and public officials are 'clean, 56 per cent of the respondents also express trust in civil servants. The corresponding figure for Sweden is as low as 17 per cent. Finland and Norway come in between with 45 and 35 per cent respectively. However, since our main interest is on the relationship between perceptions of procedural fairness and a more general support for the political system we need solid operational indicators of both perceptions of impartiality and political support.

The effect of perceptions of corruption on political support

In order to carry out a thorough and careful investigation of the relationship between perceptions of procedural fairness and political support, we turn to a new survey of political attitudes among Swedish citizens.

Data and measurement

Our analysis draws on data from *Survey 2009*, which was carried out by the *Survey Institute* at the Linnaeus University during the spring of 2009. It covers a representative sample of

[4] The respondents had the possibility to 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' with the statement 'Most civil servants can be trusted to do what is best for the country'.
[5] The correlations between the 'public officials involved in corruption' item and trust in civil servants are .33 for Denmark, .46 for Finland, .30 for Norway and .36 in Sweden (all correlation significant at the 0.01 level).

Swedish residents between 15 and 85 years of age and contains a number of questions about politics and trust that are relevant to our interests.[6] Survey 2009 does not contain explicit questions about procedural fairness, but nonetheless a few questions about the extent of corruption on the municipal level. In the analysis we will use two of these items as our measures of public perceptions of the fairness and impartiality of politicians and public officials. The first item deals with corruption and abuse of power among politicians and public officials and the respondents have the possibility to agree or disagree to the following statement: 'It is common that local level politicians and public officials take advantage of, and abuse, their position for their own good'. The second question reads: 'How do you think that the problems with abuse of power among politicians and public officials have changed during the last fifteen years?'. The respondents have the option to choose from a five-point scale going from 'increased a lot' to 'decreased a lot'.

In order to investigate the effect of perceptions of corruption on system support we also need an indicator that taps generalised support for the performance of the political system. *Survey 2009* provides a version of the frequently used question about 'satisfaction with democracy', however somewhat differently phrased: 'If you think about the democratic system in our country, how well do you think it works?' The 'satisfaction with democracy' item has been debated in the literature on system support, and it has been discussed what it actually measures (cf. Canache *et al*. 2001; Anderson 2002; Booth & Seligson 2009; Anderson & Guillory 1997; Anderson & Tverdova 2003; Linde & Ekman 2003). Empirical analyses have nevertheless shown that it should be interpreted an indicator of support for the perceived *performance* of the political system (Linde & Ekman 2003; Anderson 2002; cf. Norris 1999).

[6] See Hagevi (2010) for more information about *Survey 2009.*

Thus, we will use this item as our dependent variable, i.e. generalised support for the actual performance of the Swedish political system (cf. Fuchs et al 1995).

The effect of perceptions of corruption on support for democracy

The data from the ISSP 2006 testified to widespread public discontent with the way politicians and public officials are acting on the national level among. The questions in *Survey 2009* ask specifically about the extent of corruption on the local level. The respondents can agree or disagree to the statement that it is common that politicians and public officials take advantage of their position. 18.7 per cent 'definitely agree', 24.5 per cent agree 'to a large extent' and 25.3 per cent agree 'to some extent'. Only 9.7 per cent of the respondents do 'not at all' agree. Thus, the levels of perceived extent of corruption in Survey 2009 – which will be used in the multivariate analyses – correspond almost perfectly with those in ISSP 2006 reported above in Tables 3 and 4. Survey 2009 also contains a variable that provide strong evidence for the fact that Swedish citizens believe that corruption is a problem that has increased over the last two decades. 56 per cent of the respondents believe that the problem of corruption has increased 'strongly' or 'somewhat' during the last 15 years, while only 14 per cent believe that corruption among politicians and public officials is a diminishing problem in Swedish municipalities. These figures fit neatly with other available data. In a survey conducted in 2003, 40 per cent of the Swedish citizens stated that they believed corruption to increase in the near future. In 2007, the share of pessimistic respondents had grown to 59 per cent (Global Corruption Barometer 2003; 2007).

The relationship between perceptions of corruption and system support is tested by a series of logistic regression analyses that are presented in Table 5. The dependent variable is a dichotomy of the question 'If you think about the democratic system in our country, how well

do you think it works?' taking on the value 1 if the respondent is 'very' or 'somewhat' satisfied with the way democracy works and the value 0 if the respondent is 'very' or 'somewhat' satisfied. As indicated earlier, the performance of the Swedish democratic system is in general favourably evaluated by the citizens. 75 per cent of the respondents think that democracy works 'very' or 'fairly good'.

The first model in Table 5 examines the effect of citizens' perceptions of the *extent* of corruption among local levels politicians and public officials on satisfaction with democracy. It also includes four standard socio-demographic control variables (gender, age, education and income), in order to rule out the possibility that the strong effects of perceived corruption are due to the individuals' social characteristics rather than their perceptions of the extent of corruption. As out hypothesis suggests, perceptions of corruption show a statistically significant effect on the dependent variable, meaning that citizens who perceive politicians and public officials as not being involved in corrupt activities also tend to be content with the way the democratic political system works. The regression also shows that educational level and personal income have a positive effect on the dependent variable.

In the second model, we investigate how people's perceptions of the development of corruption affect their evaluations of the performance of the democratic system. This item asks the question in what way the respondents believe that the problems with abuse of power and corruption among local politicians and public officials have developed during the last 15 years. The analysis shows that also perceptions of the development of corruption have a statistically significant effect on political support, although not as strong as the extent of corruption.

Table 5: Effects of perceived corruption on satisfaction with democracy (logit coefficients and standard errors)

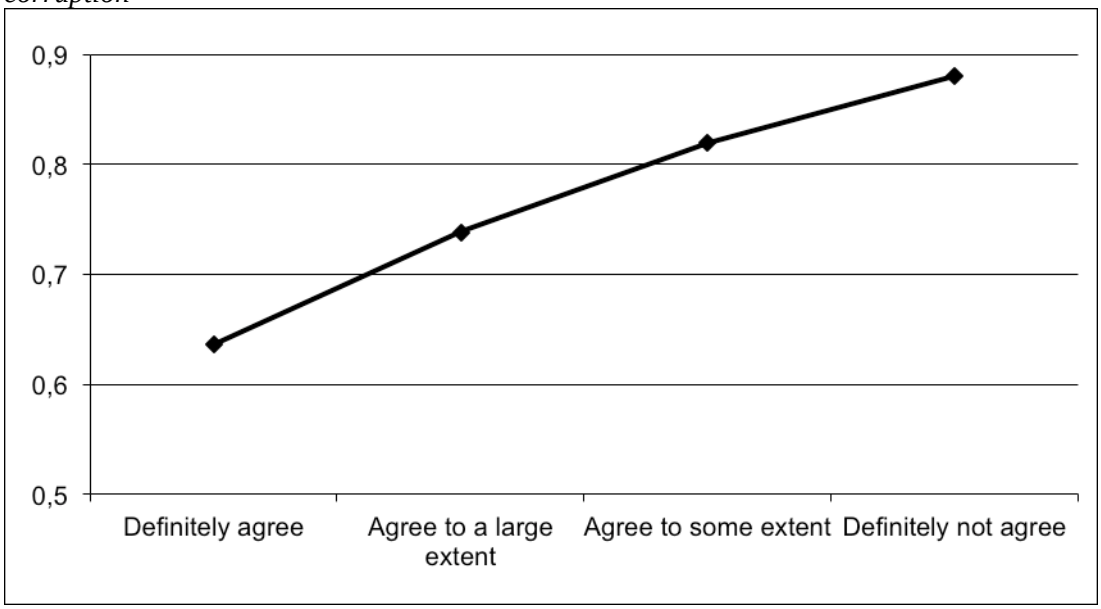
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Politicians and public officials are engaged in corruption (1=definitely agree, 4=definitely disagree)	.584*** (.072)		.476*** (.081)
Development of corruption last 15 years (1=strongly increased, 5=strongly decreased)		.349*** (.063)	.166** (.074)
Political interest (1=not at all interested, 4=very interested)			.333*** (.088)
Interpersonal trust (1=definitely disagree, 4=definitely agree)			.027 (.082)
Gender (1=female, 2=male)	-.141 (.130)	-.201 (.123)	-.245* (.136)
Age	.006* (.004)	.005 (.003)	.004 (.004)
Education (six levels)	.120*** (.038)	.169*** (.036)	.087** (.041)
Income (five levels)	.141** (.056)	.141*** (.053)	.151*** (.058)
Pseudo R2	.07	.05	.09

* p<.10 ** p<..05 *** p<.01
Source: *Survey 2009*.

The third model in Table 5 tests the independent effects of the corruption variables, and also introduces two variables that in earlier studies have shown to be of great importance for system support. As expected from the results of earlier research, political interest also shows a statistically significant effect on support. However, interpersonal trust is not of any importance for generalized system support in Sweden, at least not when controlling for perceptions of corruption: the coefficient is very small, and not statistically significant. The introduction of the control variables causes only minor changes in the effect of perceived extent of corruption. The coefficient is only slightly dwarfed and still statistically significant at the 99 per cent level.

Whether or not the respondents believe that the problems with corruption have increased during the last 15 years seems to matter less when taking their perceptions of the current extent of corruption into account, but the effect is nevertheless significant at the 95 per cent level. Thus, the empirical analysis provides strong support in favour of the 'procedural fairness claim' proposed in this paper, i.e. that the perceived level of impartiality in the processes of decision making and implementation of policies are the most important source of political support. The results from the regression analyses give evidence to a statistically significant effect of perceptions of corruption on support for the performance of the Swedish democratic system. In order to facilitate the interpretation of the logistic regression analyses, the results can be transformed into changes in the predicted probabilities on expressing satisfaction with the way democracy works. The predicted probabilities of satisfaction with democracy are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of satisfaction with democracy at different levels of perceived corruption



Note: The predicted probabilities are based on the logistic regression model 3 in Table 5. The effects of the independent variable are calculated when all other variables in the model are held at their mean.

Figure 1 shows quite substantial differences in predicted probabilities for different perceptions of the extent of corruption among local level politicians and public officials. A person who strongly disagrees to the proposition that acts of corruption and abuse of power are common has a probability of .88 to also express satisfaction with the way the democratic system works. The corresponding figure for those who believe that corruption is widespread is .64, producing a difference of 24 percentage points between the two extreme positions. Thus, although general system support in Sweden is at high levels seen from a comparative perspective, it is strongly affected by public perceptions of corruption. Therefore – from a democratic perspective – it is troublesome that a large share of the Swedish public believe that the extent of corruption has increased during the last decades, and that it is likely that it continues to increase in the future.

Conclusions

Corruption and abuse of power are topics that have typically been discussed in relation to developing countries, or in transitional settings, i.e. countries with relatively high levels of corruption. Since the mid-1990s, however, increasing attention has been paid to these issues even in advanced democracies, and nowadays it is widely acknowledged that even though states do get good gradings by Transparency International and other monitoring organisations, this does not automatically imply that corruption and abuse of power do *not* constitute real problems and therefore can have detrimental effect even in these settings. This article is about corruption in 'least corrupt settings', and we have focused on Sweden, a state that has consistently been ranked among the six least corrupt countries in the world by TI and was recently ranked as number one in *World Justice Projects* Rule of Law Index.

We have approached the issue by highlighting one crucial negative effect of corruption that is often discussed in the literature, but is seldom investigated empirically, namely: To what extent does corruption affect public support for the democratic system in an advanced democracy and least corrupt setting such as Sweden? Our results indicate that Swedish citizens to to a large extent do believe that their politicians and public officials are corrupt. In addition, 9 out 10 believe that individual citizens 'definitely' or 'probably' can take advantage of personal contacts in their dealings with public officials. This certainly raises questions about the universality and impartiality of the public administration in Sweden, particularly since corresponding levels are much lower in the other Nordic countries.

But what can these public perceptions really tell us? A skeptic could argue that there is no need to be alarmed by these results since the correspondence between citizen perceptions of corruption, and the actual occurrence of it, is in no way obvious. As valid as this argument may be, we do strongly argue that it does not really matter whether or not citizens' perception of corruption and the actual extent of corruption correspond, at least not from the system support perspective we have adopted here. Our results show that even in a 'least corrupt' setting such as Sweden, citizens' perceptions of corruption do have an independent effect on their support for the political system. Although general system support in Sweden is comparatively high, we have showed that it is affected by public perceptions of corruption.

Against this backdrop, it is deeply worrying that large shares of the Swedish citizens do believe that the extent of corruption has increased during the last decades, and think that it is likely that it will continue to increase in the future. If the share of citizens who believes that politicians and public officials are using their positions for their own good is increasing in the

future, as indicated by our data, in the long run it could have a significant eroding effect on general system support in Sweden.

References

Adserà, A., Boix, C. & Payne, M. 2003. 'Are You Being Served? Political Accountability and Quality of Government', *The Journal of Law, Economics, & Organization* 19(2), 445–490.

Agrast, M. D, Botero, J. C. & Ponce, A. 2010. *Rule of Law Index 2010.* Washington, D.C.: The World Justice Project.

Anderson, C. J., Blais, A., Bowler, S., Donovan, T., & Listhaug, O. 2005. *Loser's Consent: Elections and Democratic Legitimacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Anderson, C.J. & Tverdova, Y.V. 2003. 'Corruption, Political Allegiances and Attitudes toward Government in Contemporary Democracies', *American Journal of Political Science* 47(1), 91–109.

Anderson, C.J. & Tverdova, Y.V. 2001. 'Winners, Losers, and Attitudes about Government in Contemporaty Democracies', *International Political Science Review* 22(4), 321–338.

Anderson, C.J. & Guillory, C.A. 1997. 'Political Institutions and Satisfaction with Democracy: A Cross-National Analysis of Consensus and Majoritarian Systems', *American Political Science Review* 91(1): 66–81.

Andersson, S., Bergh, A., Erlingsson, G & Sjölin, M., 2010. *Korruption, maktmissbruk och legitimitet.* Stockholm: Norstedts.

Blais, A. & Gélineau , F. 2007. 'Winning, Losing, and Satisfaction with Democracy', *Political Studies* 55(2), 425–441.

Booth, J.A & Seligson, M.A. 2009. *The Legitimacy Puzzle in Latin America: Political Support and Democracy in Eight Nations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bowler, S. & Karp, J.A. 2004. 'Politicians, Scandals, and Trust in Government', *Political Studies* 26 (3), 271–287.

Canache, D., Mondak, J. & Seligson, M.A. 2001. 'Meaning and Measurement in Cross-National Research on Satisfaction with Democracy'. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 65, 506–528.

Charron, N. & Lapuente, V. 2010. 'Does Democracy Produce Quality of Government?', *European Journal of Political Research* 49 (4), 443–470.

Clarke, H.D., Dutt, N. & Kornberg, A. 1993. 'The Political Economy of Attitudes toward Polity and Society in Western European Democracies', *Journal of Politics* 55(4), 998–1021.

Dalton, R.J. 2004. *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Della Porta, D. & Vanucci, A. 1997. 'The Perverse Effects of Political Corruption', *Political Studies* 45 (4), 516–538.

Easton, D. 1975. ‘A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support’, *British Journal of Political Science* 5(4), 435–457.

Easton, D. 1965. *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. New York: John Wiley.

Erlingsson, G. Ó. 2010. ‘Ska vi oroa oss för korruption och maktmissbruk i Sverige?’, in Hagevi, M., ed., *Avstamp. Svenska folkets värden och syn på brännande samhällsfrågor*. Växjö: Linneaus University Press.

Erlingsson, G. Ó., Bergh, A. & Sjölin, M. 2008. ‘Public Corruption in Swedish Municipalities: Trouble Looming on the Horizon?’, *Local Government Studies* 34 (5), 595–608.

Esaiasson, P. 2010. ‘Will citizens take no for an answer? What government officials can do to enhance decision acceptance’, *European Political Science Review* 2(3), 351–371.

Evans, G. & Whitefield, S. 1995. ‘The Politics and Economics of Democratic Commitment: Support for Democracy in Transition Societies’, *British Journal of Political Science* 25(4), 485–514.

Finkel, S.E., Muller, E.N. & Seligson, M.A. 1989. ‘Economic Crisis, Incumbent Performance and Regime Support: A Comparison of Longitudinal Data from West Germany and Costa Rica’, *British Journal of Political Science* 19(3), 329–351.

Fuchs, D., Guidorossi, G. & Svensson, P. 1995. ‘Support for the Democratic System’, in Klingemann, H-D. & Fuchs, D., eds., *Citizens and the State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Geissel, B. 2008. ‘Do Critical Citizens Foster Better Governance? A Comparative Study’, *West European Politics* 31(5), 855–873.

Gilley, B. 2009. *The Right to Rule: How States Win and Lose Legitimacy*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Global Corruption Barometer. 2003. Berlin: Transparency International.

Global Corruption Barometer. 2007. Berlin: Transparency International.

Goudie, A.W. & Stasavage, D. 1998. ‘A Framework for the Analysis of Corruption’, *Crime, Law and Social Change* 29 (2-3), 113–159.

Groups of States Against Corruption. 2001. ‘First Evaluation Round: Evaluational Report on Sweden’, *Council of Europe*, Strasbourg, 2001-05-15.

Hagevi, M. 2010. ‘Survey 2009: Teknisk rapport’, in Hagevi, M., ed., 2010. *Avstamp. Svenska folkets värden och syn på brännande samhällsfrågor*. Växjö: Linneaus University Press.

Hofferbert, R.I., & Klingemann, H-D. 1999. ‘Remembering the Bad Old Days: Human Rights, Economic Conditions, and Democratic Performance in Transitional Regimes’, *European Journal of Political Research* 36(2), 155–174.

Inglehart, R. 1997. *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Inglehart, R., & Welzel, C. 2005. *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jain, A.K. 2001. ‘Corruption: A Review’, *Journal of Economic Surveys* 15 (1), 71–121.

Kumlin, S. 2007. 'The Welfare State: Values, Policy, Preferences, and Performance Evaluations', in Dalton, R. & Klingemann, H-D., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kumlin, S. 2004. *The Personal and the Political: How Personal Welfare State Experiences Affect Political Trust and Ideology*. Houndsmills: Palgrave.

Kumlin, S., & Rothstein, B. 2005. 'Making and Breaking Social Capital: The Impact of Welfare-State Institutions', *Comparative Political Studies* 38(4), 339–365.

Kunioka, T. & Woller, G.M. 1999. 'In (a) Democracy We Trust: Social and Economic Determinants of Support for Democratic Procedures in Central and Eastern Europe', *Journal of Socio-Economics* 28, 577–596.

Kurer, O. 2005. 'Corruption: An Alternative Approach to Its Definition and Measurement', *Political Studies* 53, 222–239.

La Porta, R., Lopez-de-Silanes, F., Schleifer, A.& Vishny, R. 1999. 'The Quality of Government', *The Journal of Law, Economics and Organization* 15(1), 222–279.

Linde, J. 2009. 'Why Feed the Hand that Bites You? Quality of Government and System Support in the Post-Communist EU Member States', *OoG Working Paper Series*, 2009:20. University of Gothenburg: The Quality of Government Institute.

Linde, J. & Ekman, J. 2003. 'Satisfaction with Democracy: A Note on a Frequently Used Indicator in Comparative Politics', *European Journal of Political Research* 42(3), 391–408.

Mattes, R. & Bratton, M. 2007. 'Learning about Democracy in Africa: Awareness, Performance, and Experience', *American Journal of Political Science* 51(1), 192–217.

Miller, A. & Listhaug, O. 1999. 'Political Performance and Institutional Trust'. in Norris, P., ed., *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Norris, P. 1999. 'Introduction: The Growth of Critical Citizens', in Norris, P., ed., *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Putnam, R.D. 1993. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rose, R. & Mishler, W. 1994. 'Mass Reaction to Regime Change in Eastern Europe: Polarization or Leaders and Laggards?' *British Journal of Political Science* 24(2), 159–182.

Rose. R., Mishler, W. & Haerpfer, C. 1998. *Democracy and its Alternatives: Understanding Post-Communist Societies*. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Rose-Ackerman, S. 1999. *Corruption and Government: Causes, Consequences, and Reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rothstein, B. 2009. 'Creating Political Legitimacy: Electoral Democracy Versus Quality of Government', *American Behavioral Scientist* 53 (3), 311–330.

Rothstein, B. 2003. 'Social Capital, Economic Growth and Quality of Government: The Causal Mechanism', *New Political Economy* 8(1), 49–71.

Rothstein, B. & Teorell, J. 2008. ‘What is Quality of Government? A Theory of Impartial Government Institutions’, *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions* 21(2), 165–190.

Sandgren, C. 2009. ‘Hög tid att partierna redovisar sina bidrag’, DN debatt, *Dagens nyheter* 2009-11-09.

Sandholtz, W. & Koetzle, W. 2000. ‘Accounting for Corruption: Economic Structure, Democracy, and Trade’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 44 (1), 31–50.

Seligson, M.A. 2002. ‘The Impact of Corruption on Regime Legitimacy: A Comparative Study of Four Latin American Countries’, *The Journal of Politics* 62(2), 408–433.

Tyler, T. R. 2006. *Why People Obey the Law*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tyler, T.R. 1994. ‘Governing Amid Diversity: The Effect of Fair Decisionmaking Procedures on the Legitimacy of Government’, *Law and Society Review* 28(4), 809–832.

Tyler, T.R., Caspar, J.D. & Fisher, B. 1989. ‘Maintaining Allegiance toward Political Authorities: The Role of Prior Attitudes and the Use of Fair Procedures’. *American Journal of Political Science* 33(3), 629–652.

Wagner, A.F., Schneider, F. & Halla, M. 2008. ‘The Quality of Institutions and Satisfaction with Democracy in Western Europe: A Panel Analysis’, *European Journal of Political Economy* 25(1), 30–41.

Warren, M.E., ed., 2003. *Democracy and Trust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weatherford, M. S. 1992. ‘Measuring Political Legitimacy’, *American Political Science Review*, 86 (1), 149–166.